

# Youth Grows Old

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Robert Nathan



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YOUTH GROWS OLD



# YOUTH GROWS OLD

by

ROBERT NATHAN

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To the poet, B. P. Clark, Jr., whose  
sweeter songs have travelled with my  
own down these few streets to age.

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## YOUTH GROWS OLD

He lives on pain, and sells his utter  
Grief for roses, bread, and butter.



*PROEM: The poet apologizes for himself.*

*Man grows up  
In quietness,  
As he grows older  
He talks less.*

*When he is old  
He sits among  
Gray grandfathers  
And holds his tongue.*

*I'd rather sit  
By a wine-shelf  
And tell people  
About myself.*

*The poet, made aware of time's passing . . .*

May wanders quiet, warm, and whole,  
Over the gardens of his soul;

Which gives him grief, for well he knows  
May only comes when April goes,

And April gone, there end in truth  
Youth's comfortable plans for youth.

To the bright pinafore of May  
All gardens have a word to say,

Save only his that lie so bare  
There are not even thistles there;

He would be satisfied to see  
Even a bean, even a pea,

And praise the smallest flower that grows,  
For June will come before he knows,

And once the spring is gone indeed,  
There's no more planting any seed.

. . . *offers up a simple prayer.*

Lord God of Souls, if any be  
To hear my prayer: from open doubt,  
From unbelief in Thine and Thee,  
I lift my rusty worship out.

The grand and eloquent design  
I neither favor nor beseech,  
The simple vision still be mine,  
And mine the piety of speech.

Give me no more than homely words,  
And kindly thoughts, to build my house;  
No more than what is given the birds,  
Or less than might be loaned a mouse.

*At the symphony . . .*

(Cesar Franck D Minor)

The 'cellos, setting forth apart,  
Grumbled and sang, and so the day  
From the low beaches of my heart  
Turned in tranquillity away.

And over weariness and doubt  
Rose up the horns like bellied sails,  
Like canvas of the soul flung out  
To rising and orchestral gales;

Passed on and left irresolute  
The ebony, the silver throat;

Low over clarinet and flute  
Hung heaven upon a single note.

*. . . he thinks how beauty forever escapes the  
lonely heart . . .*

Beauty is ever to the lonely mind  
A shadow fleeing; she is never plain.  
She is a visitor who leaves behind  
The gift of grief, the souvenir of pain.  
Yes, if a trace of loveliness remain,  
It is to memory alone addressed;  
That spirit looks for beauty but in vain  
Which is not by an inner beauty blessed.  
And, as the ebbing ocean on the beach  
Leaves but a trace of evanescent foam,  
So beauty passes ever out of reach,  
Save to the heart where happiness is home.  
There beauty walks, wherever it may be,  
And paints the sunset on the quiet sea.

*. . . and because he is still a young man,  
speculates on death.*

Old lives drift quietly on sleepy days,  
Falter and come to rest like rivered leaves,  
Like autumn leaves blown along sunny water.  
Old lives are waiting for their yesterdays  
To catch them, until suddenly death lays  
A tiny finger on their sleepiness,  
And they are less than wind or anything,  
The foam of clouds, the rain's adventuring.

You who have held death great, learn it is not!  
Silence comes hushing down, and the last breath  
Flutters against the dark and is forgot.  
And then so slight, so delicate is death  
That there is but the end of a leaf's fall,  
A moment of no consequence at all.

*He is oppressed with a sense of loneliness.*

Comes fall, and with a sound of leaves,  
The wind's incorrigible stroke  
Blows out the insufficient sleeves  
Of my forlorn and ancient cloak.

Expect no tenement, my friend,  
Beneath this scant and threadbare vest;  
Alone, to my indifferent end  
I go my way, and God knows best.

*The poet contemplates the Exile.*

Thou, Israel, on a foreign shore,  
So low, so low, that once was great,  
What altars do thy sons adore?  
The golden calf, the scarlet whore,  
Phoenicia's greed, Assyria's hate.

No more, Jerusalem, no more  
Shalt thou behold thine ancient state,  
Or round thee in the cloudy gloom  
Remark the heavenly advocate.  
The Syrian desert shrouds his fate,  
The Lydian wilderness his tomb.

*He attends the funeral of a Jew.*

Who breathes the air of native skies,  
Knows all he needs to know of heaven,  
The meadows are his paradise,  
The mountains are his choirs seven,

About him like a sound of bells  
At evening from the village steeple,  
He hears in pious syllables  
The old responses of his people.

There is a grave beneath the swell  
Of some mean meadow in the west  
For thee, for thee, O Israel,  
There shalt thou find eternal rest,

And sorrow make more green the sod  
Above thee and about thee laid,  
Who elsewhere and else had made  
No plea to heaven or troubled God.

*He thinks of the friend of his youth, and of his  
rooms at college . . .*

Old friend, where you and I were once at home,  
Autumn has given to another heir,  
And other feet come drumming up the stair  
Where oft I waited for your feet to come.  
We have gone by, and I shall never share  
The music of your samovar at night,  
Or on a morning full of April light,  
Come striding through the door and find you there.  
But in the slow returning dusk once more,  
Less eagerly, less certain of my part,  
I'll come with an old music in my heart,  
Down Holyoke to that familiar door.  
Knowing you have not entered it all day,  
I shall go very quietly away.

. . . *and reproaches himself with idleness.*

O Sleepy me,  
Where are the years you borrowed out of youth,  
Whereof you are in debt now to the wind,  
And hills and sea?  
Say, have you lost them in a little room,  
And have your fingers like an idle sloven  
Upon an empty loom  
Spent the magnificence?

O Sleepy me,  
How little you have woven.

Why, you took  
All youth, no less  
Of sky and challenge, all of eagerness,  
And talk and lilacs.  
And your fingers sought  
Among old songs,

Old songs to be forgot  
And nothing wrought.

There was a sky beyond your window seat,  
I cannot find it here.  
There was a chime at dusk in your teapot,  
And voices coming near,  
Voices along the street.  
There was a wind beyond your window pane,  
Blowing each day to brim the empty bowls  
With wind and day again.  
All, all forgot.

And from your room's determinate frontiers,  
My heart no answer hears,  
Nor wind, nor voice to call.

O sleepy me,  
See, you have lost them all,  
All the bright years,  
In a little room nodding before the coals.

*The poet describes his love.*

So tall she is, and slender, and so fair,  
So like a child for play, a queen for grace,  
So pale and proud she is, with that bright hair  
Blown in a storm of gold about her face;  
So gay she is, and with such pretty words,  
So like a thrush for making a sweet note,  
And then her hands, like little anxious birds—  
My heart to watch her trembles in my throat.  
So that I am all wonder to behold her,  
I being I, she being what she is,  
And dare in reverence alone to fold her,  
And touch her cheek and forehead with a kiss;  
All loveliness she is, the whole world over,  
All joy, all grief, all beauty to her lover.

*He compares himself to the birds.*

The Lord of all things  
With liberalitee,  
Maketh the small birds  
To sing from every tree.

The Lord of all things  
He maketh also me,  
Giveth me no wings,  
Giveth me no words.

*The poet envies a lark.*

Lark's wing  
In the blue,  
And no cloud  
Down to the far, faint edges of the world.  
Sun, and a spring wind  
Running the roads.  
Lark's wing  
High, high,  
Shrilling a song . . .

Oh Lark,  
You do not know anything.  
You do not sing to the sun, nor to the blue sky,  
Nor to the spring winds running the roads.  
You sing  
Because you are a lark,  
And have nothing else to do.  
While I, a lover,  
With the beauty of morning beating on my face—  
I cannot sing at all!

*He considers the arrogance of wealth.*

When the Lord was born of Mary,  
Rich men, wise and wary,  
Living in that period,  
Divided up the earth with God.

But God, who never slumbers,  
Has a poor head for numbers.  
So the rich as we progress  
Get more, and God less.

Soon the dairy companies,  
In unusual liveries,  
Will attempt to furnish sunny  
Heaven all its milk and honey.

*The poet speaks to his love.*

Hush, thou, beside my cheek,  
And do not speak.  
Love is not all, but let no other word  
Than love be heard,  
For as we older grow,  
Wide wanders wisdom, but the heart beats slow.  
Cheek beside cheek,  
Hush, now, nor speak.

*The poet pleads with his love.*

Ah, love me, love me, for my youth is flying,  
Age's old knuckles knock upon my heart;  
The hour is late, the fire of faith is dying,  
Stay with me love, while other guests depart.  
Stay with me, beauty, for silence now, and sorrow  
Stir in the corner; weariness awakes;  
They will be there to sit with me tomorrow;  
Stay with me, love, until the morning breaks.  
Ah, love me, love me, I can feel September  
Creep into winter, I can feel the snow.  
You only, loving me, make me remember,  
You only, singing, make the darkness glow.  
Let me believe I hear my lost youth crying,  
His voice in your voice, while the fire is dying.

*He sends his love a gift of flowers.*

Here's last year's grief  
In the green leaf;

And all he knows is  
That Time will take  
All heartbreak,  
And turn it to roses.

*On top of a hill . . .*

On the top of a hill  
Where the wind blows  
Am I—  
So still,  
So high—  
And far below the warm fields doze  
Quite placidly beneath the trees,  
In green and brown  
And shot with bees.

. . . *he discusses himself.*

My mind is like the swaying boughs of trees,  
Murmuring with leaves and slender branches  
Which ripple in and out above my head  
And tangle in the wind.  
They throw a shadow  
Cool, wide, and deep.  
Wherein I wander curiously about,  
And sometimes I look up, and through the lacy,  
Tumultous entanglement of leaves,  
I catch a glimpse of the serene, still sky.

*The poet contemplates his daughter in the evening.*

Before her supper where she sits  
With every favored toe she plays,  
Singing whatever ballad fits  
The past romances of her days.

The dusk comes softly to her room,  
The night winds in the branches stir,  
That nations battle to their doom  
Across the seas, is naught to her.

For what she does not know, she eats,  
A worm, a twig, a block, a fly,  
And every novel thing she meets  
Is bitten into bye and bye.

She from the blankets of her bed  
Holds no opinion on the war,  
But munches on her thumb instead,  
This being what a thumb is for.

The troubles that invade the day,  
On some remote tomorrow creep;  
Comes Bertha with the supper tray,  
And—now I laymen down ee beep.

*He writes in a book of poems.*

He who could do the talk for three,  
For him, for you, and lonely me,  
Now lies without a sound  
In the dark ground.

While we, who never speak at all  
From garden wall to garden wall,  
Of us the waiting dark  
Will leave no mark.

Then hear, afar, the faint haloo  
From frightened me to frightened you,  
And think each cottage light  
Is so much less of night.

*The poet loses his love.*

She bent her head, and all her golden hair  
Fell on my face in faint and foaming fall.  
I was a city on the sea's gray stair,  
With idle ships along the old sea wall.  
She spoke, and beauty like an outward tide  
Drew all my dreams to sea. So to the foam,  
With lifted bows, deliberate with pride,  
They cleared me going seaward, going home.  
Bare is the ocean after the great gales,  
The snowy gulls of silence float above;  
Rude rolls the sea o'er unreturning sails,  
The deeps will keep my lost and weary love,  
While still her beauty with the dying breeze,  
Blows on my heart across the empty seas.

*The poet is left to himself.*

The feet that were not fain to go—  
Are gone at last along the stair,  
Across the windy hall below,  
The door has shut on those dear folk,

And left my house so bare, so bare,  
Through cobwebs of forgotten smoke,  
Now with a sound of quiet brooms  
Comes silence sweeping out her rooms.

*He closes his door.*

So then to bed and bid the world goodnight.  
Slow falls the moon across the western slopes;  
See how the city in her lonely light  
Puts out like lanterns one by one our hopes.

*He endeavors to console himself . . .*

When the day in quiet gown  
Stands in front of evening's door,  
When the sun is safely down  
Heaven's steep part;

When the tide across the shore,  
Growing darker, foaming whiter,  
Turns upon the sea once more,  
Seeks the deep part—

When the little moon grows brighter,  
Memory, like the lamplighter,  
Brings his ladder, sly and slim.  
Grief comes running after him.  
She will never let him slight her;  
What he lights, she will dim—  
Go to sleep, heart.

. . . *by thinking that spring, tho' fled, will return.*

Tread softly, sorrow, for the summer passes,  
Her leaves are falling in continual rain;  
Let me be silent as the withered grasses,  
Let me be quiet as the gathered grain.  
This season that inevitably closes,  
The swift returning year again will bring;  
The summer passes with a rain of roses,  
And winter follows, fading into spring.  
So let me, like a tree, with natural reason  
Put all my buds to bed at winter's start.  
Then in the April of another season,  
Beauty will break and blossom in my heart,  
And birds renew their youth along the bough,  
When all is green—my heart remembers how.

*He sings to himself . . .*

Love is the first thing.  
Love goes past.  
Sorrow is the next thing,  
Quiet is the last.

Love is a good thing,  
Quiet isn't bad,  
But sorrow is the best thing  
I've ever had.

. . . *and listens to the wind.*

High in the night, forgotten in the dark,  
Over the house the branches of the trees  
Sway to the passing of the wind, and hark,  
How like the rushing of reverberant seas,  
With mightier tongue the gale  
Up from the west,  
Soars through the whisper and the toss of trees.

Across the silence of this fire lit room,  
Where through the dusk and coming of the dark,  
The glowing embers thinned,  
And out of distances immanifest,  
Companion voices in ambiguous glees  
Fluttered and sang and doubled in the gloom,  
I stare at quietness, who is my guest,  
And hear the storm and blowing of the wind.

*He blames himself* . . .

When I was a young man,  
I said, bright and bold,  
I would be a great one  
When I was old.

When I was a young man,  
But that was long ago,  
I sang the merry old songs  
All men know.

When I was a young man,  
When I was young and smart,  
I think I broke a mirror,  
Or a girl's heart.

*. . . and feels that since sorrow and he are such  
old friends . . .*

I am no stranger in the house of pain,  
I am familiar with its every part,  
From the low stile, then up the crooked lane  
To the dark doorway, intimate to my heart.  
Here did I sit with grief and eat his bread,  
Here was I welcomed as misfortune's guest,  
And there's no room but where I've laid my head  
On misery's accommodating breast.  
So, sorrow, does my knocking rouse you up?  
Open the door, old mother; it is I.  
Bring grief's good goblet out, the sad, sweet cup,  
Fill it with wine of silence, strong and dry:  
For I've a story to amuse your ears,  
Of youth and hope, of middle age, and tears.

. . . *perhaps it is time to take sorrow more  
philosophically.*

Come, sorrow, time to part, year's turning,  
The elm trees borrow  
Their last bright colors, last leaves burning—  
Winter tomorrow.

You take one path, I the other—  
Now clasp hands—  
I'll send you news of me, old mother,  
From foreign lands.

*He decides to travel and bids farewell to his home.*

Now fare you well, my road,  
And fare you well, my hill,  
And for a winter, little house  
Rest quietly and still.

For there will be no footsteps  
To enter in the gate,  
And none to hear the wind now,  
When the night is late,

And there will be no fire  
To kindle in the gloom,  
And there will be no talk now,  
To warm each room.

And hushed is the laughter,  
And put away the pen,  
And dark is the kitchen,  
And quiet is the den.

So fare you well, my little house,  
And fare you well, my hill.  
Old friends, old friends,  
Rest quietly and still.

*He visits the desert.*

Here all is waste,  
All is dry and still.  
Death is here,  
God is here.  
They are talking together.  
This is my home, says death;  
This is my home, says God.

And in my heart, after weeping,  
I can hear their low voices.

*He finds himself near his love . . .*

Just one hill, then, between us,  
Just one word?  
The rising moon has seen us,  
Looked, and heard?

That hill—my feet would take it  
Like a bird.  
But my heart would never make it—  
Not that word.

. . . *but hurries by.*

My heart is ever swift to rest, but I am slow to mind it.  
I rouse it in the earliest dawn, when other folks are sleeping.  
While beauty goes before my face, and sorrow runs  
    behind it,  
I dare not tarry anywhere, lest sorrow catch me weeping.

*He bids farewell to his dreams.*

Now the round moon on roads above the trees  
Walks in the sky, and talks to every star,  
But I turn back from roads the like of these  
To where my own roads are:

Turn back to desert lands, to lonely, high  
Lost hills, and winter woods, and bitter seas;  
Only the moon can walk across the sky,  
Over the trees.

*He remembers past autumns . . .*

Five autumns gone—  
The same leaves falling,  
Unchanging, under  
Unchanging skies.  
Unaltering voices  
Calling, calling . . .  
Nothing replies.

Will my heart never  
Cry out again  
With the old pain,  
The old wonder?

*. . . and wonders if beauty will ever come to  
him again.*

Will beauty come when I am old and tired,  
Too old for knowing, too old for caring much  
How the heart hoped and how the eyes admired,  
How the lips sang, how fingers loved to touch?

Will beauty come again when night is falling,  
When eyes are dim and weary hands are still,  
And call me home—Oh, will I hear her calling  
Over the sea again, over the hill?

*In the cold and quiet north . . .*

So, on a night in winter, with a black wind moving  
In solemn tide among incredible stars,  
I climbed the long road that led up the hill.  
Dark branches bent above me disapproving,  
The spacious night was still.  
No far sound broke  
The frosty silence and the black wind moving.  
The hushed voices of the snowy meadows  
Crept through the pasture bars.

I topped the hill. One lantern there awoke.  
A lonely cottage, and the fields were wide  
In a dark, breathless sea. The road went by,  
The great wind smote and wrestled with my stride,  
And my heart spoke.  
"Here," said my heart, "Old winter is at home.  
*You are not welcome at his fireside.*"

. . . *he remembers the sun and sea of the  
southland.*

Oh heart, heart, heart, are you weeping for the west,  
For roses, and birdsong, and salt sea foam,  
And the clear green sky with the moon upon her breast  
Like a ship, like a sail, like a lugger going home?

Oh heart, heart, heart, you are crying in my mouth  
For a brown, broad valley—how I know, how I know—  
And the same seas singing in the west, in the south,  
And two young lovers long ago.

*The poet sees the city skyscrapers at evening.*

They stand like sentry-boxes, tall and still,  
But taller far than any sentry box,  
More like an umbrous, lantern-lighted hill,  
Or seaward cliffs, or wind-assaulted rocks.  
They have no joy or grief, yet each one mocks  
The night that over Egypt cast its chill,  
The dark that ever at the portal knocks,  
The frosty dews that from oblivion spill.  
So poets, like old Atlas, bowed with earth,  
Their shoulders bent beneath a load of pain,  
Careless of idle sorrow, empty of mirth,  
Stand to the sky, their feet upon the plain.  
These keep the dark at bay, these guard the door,  
Their joy behind them, and the night before.

*He hears the sound of distant bells . . .*

Bells in the country,  
They sing the heart to rest  
When night is on the high road  
And day is in the west.

And once they came to my house  
As soft as beggars shod,  
And brought it nearer heaven,  
And maybe nearer God.

. . . *and wonders when his journey will end.*

Home, over the hilltop in the night,  
The bees go singing still,  
Under the stars.

When shall we, too,  
With hearts as light,  
Go home over the hill?

*The poet returns to his home.*

O let the waves of quiet break  
In snowier foam before my doors,  
And gradual, healing silence make  
Her music on these shores.

And let me hear, as evening closes,  
No more songs, and no more words  
To dull the scent of rained-on roses,  
Or hush the talk of birds.

*He finds himself alone again.*

Here in my quiet house, I who was swift to sing,  
Wait for your distant hail, wait your beloved call,  
Only the autumn leaves over the meadows fall,  
Only the wind replies, lonely and whispering.

*He considers the passing years . . .*

All goes by, the bright fashion,  
The brave right, the sad wrong,  
The wild love and the gay passion,  
The bitter trouble, the sweet song.

And beauty goes, flying, flying,  
And men's courage, and women's fears,  
And nothing stays but the old crying,  
The old sorrow, the old tears.

. . . and thinks that spring will never return as  
gaily as of old.

No more, no more  
With the spring's first green  
Comes love to the door  
With his peddler's pack.

Rap, rap, rap,  
Who's to be seen?

*Beggars and tradesmen*  
*Go round to the back.*

*He turns to the hills for comfort.*

You solemn folk, you hills,  
You lonely people,

When tides go out,  
Where green deep waters were,  
Will only quiet shells  
Be left like the white bones  
Of old sea bells.

When tides go out,  
My hands like prodigals  
Creep to each lonely hill,  
And wanly offer up  
Their river empty bowls  
For you to fill.

You hills,  
You homely folk,  
I shall not come  
At some ebb tide.

*He longs to lie at last in the southland.*

I shall not fear the thought of lying deep  
Beneath some windy meadow in the south,  
With roses making beautiful my mouth,  
And boughs to make a shelter for my sleep.

I shall be glad to hear the ocean sweep  
With solemn water through her distant tides,  
Content to hear no other thing besides,  
Save birds forever singing where I sleep.

*He hears a knock at his door.*

Knock . . . who knocks at my inhospitable door?  
I turn the key.  
So, in the evening, I open, and face once more  
Mountain and sea.

Shall I behold them, the foamy, irregular shore,  
The shadowy steep?  
Or is it only the fog and the rain at my door,  
Night and the deep?

*The poet opens to his guest.*

Night and the wind at last, coming afar, faintly the  
breaking snow  
Of the sea under the dark, whispers and foams; deeper  
the meadows grow,  
Quieter now the rivers sing to the still trees, and low  
boughs swing.  
Only a gradual murmur of wings, wings calling and  
gathering.  
Wings high in the dark, deep in the wind, flutter the  
night like rain  
Over me where I wait, old and glad, so at the end to go  
Swiftly and well indeed. This I ask, only to hear again  
Out of the shadow of hills that my curious fingers into  
a music made,  
Godspeed.  
Faintly an echo of singing while the dusk grows and the  
chimed voices fade.

*He writes his epitaph.*

Say he was sad, for there was none to love him,  
And sing his song.  
Now he is still, and the brown thrush above him  
Sings all day long.

Say he was lost, for there was none to find him,  
And hold him tight.  
Now the brown hands of mother earth will mind him  
All through the night.





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Nathan, Robert, 1894-1985.

Youth grows old



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